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ROARS OF LAUGHTER

A STUDY OF THE USE OF LAUGHTER AS A SOUND-IMAGE MOTIF
IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES AND TALES OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

by

Martha Stribling Smith

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Robert A. Heston
Thesis Director

Oral Examination
Committee Members

Raymond Butts
John Bryant

Kenneth Smith

270339

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The purpose of this thesis is to study Hawthorne's use of ironic laughter as a sound-image motif pointing to the presence of evil. Hawthorne's concept of sin grows out of his world-view inherited from the Puritan ancestors and Elizabethan literature. Sin is a violation of one's ordained place in the chain of being, either the aspiration toward the knowledge, powers, and prerogatives of God, or the materialistic, sensual refusal to rise above animal nature.

Laughter as part of a characterization is traced in one instance to Shakespeare's *Robin Goodfellow*. Milton's use of laughter suggests the philosophical ideas inherent in Hawthorne's use of laughter as a sound-image. Gothic novels furnish the convention of fiendish laughter which Hawthorne uses and adapts to his own purposes.

Hawthorne's tales supply examples of laughter as a sound-image characterizing fiends, witches, and other pointedly evil beings. Laughter is more subtly used to suggest the presence of sin or evil in human characters and to indicate a character's initiation into the knowledge of sin. Laughter is also used to characterize those who are gross and sensual, or who are blind to spiritual truth or aspiration on the part of others. The sound of laughter is heard by characters as coming from nature itself or non-human sources. The significance of these laughter sounds relates

the momentary sin of man to the continuing meaning of nature and also serves to convey to the reader the emotional intensity of the experience. Hawthorne used laughter as a sound-image motif in poetic fashion to unify and create structure in two stories, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and "Ethan Brand." These stories are examined in detail, showing Hawthorne's artistic and poetic use of laughter.

Laughter is used by Hawthorne as a conscious and artistic device to indicate the presence of evil in various guises and to create poetic unity. The subtlety and ambiguity of his language in the situations where laughter is used indicate the complex intermixture of good and evil in human character. Good may be masked by the appearance of evil, and evil or sin may be the means of eventual good.

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INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne has been recognized as one of the outstanding American writers for more than a hundred years. His Scarlet Letter was recognized as an important literary work immediately upon its publication and has been continuously regarded as one of the two or three best long prose fiction works to be written in America. One of the most interesting things about the writings of Hawthorne is the upsurge of new study and criticism of them beginning in the 1930's. Scores of new biographies and critical studies have been published, comprising a new assessment of the man and his work. In large part this is due to an overall increase in literary study, especially of American literature, and to the new insights into the use of language to create literature--into aesthetic form and texture. A close reading of Hawthorne's works has revealed beauty and meaning achieved by his use of allegory, symbolism, and suggestive images in a way that is related to poetic language. In this he and other mid-nineteenth century writers--Melville, Poe, Whitman--are precursors of modern writers. Lewis Mumford has said that "at heart, the American novelists were all transcendental. The scene was a symbol; they scarcely had the patience to describe it; they were inter-

ested in it only because it pointed to something more important."¹

Hawthorne makes this view of reality as symbol clear in distinguishing between the "Novel" and the "Romance." The former, he says, "is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience."² In Mumford's terms, the Novel writer does have "the patience to describe" the actual. The Romance writer, on the other hand, must adhere closely to the "truth of the human heart." He "has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances . . . of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the pictures" (III.13). It is in the area of Hawthorne's management of the medium that this study will deal.

Several critics have noted and commented on Hawthorne's use of ironic, inappropriate, or incongruous laughter as part of his development of certain characters, though none has studied it in detail. Hawthorne himself describes this in "Ethan Brand." "Laughter, when out of place, mistimed,

¹ Quoted from The Golden Day by Harry Levin in The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville (New York, 1958), p. ix.

² Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Cambridge, 1883), 13 vols. III.13. Future references in the text will be to this edition of the works of Hawthorne.

or bursting forth from a disordered state of feeling, may be the most terrible modulation of the human voice. The laughter of one asleep, even if it be a little child,--the madman's laugh,--the wild, screaming laugh of a born idiot,--are sounds that we sometimes tremble to hear and would always willingly forget. Poets have imagined no utterance of fiends or hobgoblins so fearfully appropriate as a laugh" (III.482). There are many examples in Hawthorne's tales of this "terrible modulation of the human voice." This study will attempt to show what part they play in Hawthorne's presentation of the "truth of the human heart."

There are several preconceptions upon which this study is based. The first has already been mentioned: that Hawthorne saw reality as symbolic. This reflects not so much his kinship with the Transcendentalists as his inheritance of the Elizabethan-Puritan view of the world. As Matthiessen observes, we can "come closer to Hawthorne's intentions by observing that his psychological assumptions were still fundamentally the same as Milton's."³ From his earliest childhood he read and reread Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Bunyan. In addition he became interested in the early history of Salem and the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts. His own ancestors played an important part in the colony.

³ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York, 1941), p. xiii.

Speaking of the basic agreement between Anglicans and Puritans, Perry Miller writes that "they both believed that the visible universe was under God's direction and continuous guidance, and that though effects seemed to be produced by natural causes--what at that time were called 'secondary causes'--the actual government of the minutest event, the rise of the sun, the fall of a stone, the beat of the heart, was under the direct and immediate supervision of God."⁴ This was part of their Platonic conception of the world as "a copy or material counterpart of an ordered hierarchy of ideas existing in the mind of God."⁵ Since this was true, then the Christian viewed events of sense experience as integral parts of the moral order of the universe. With Shakespeare's banished Duke, he might find "books in the running brooks,/ Sermons in stones, and good in everything." "Every single fact was a symbol, not only of the law governing things, but of the laws of the spirit."⁶ This Puritan view of reality as symbol is closely related to that of the Transcendentalists, as Miller points out: "It is strange that the generation of Emerson and Alcott should have had to go to Emanuel Swedenborg for a doctrine of 'correspond-

⁴ Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, The Puritans (New York, 1938), p. 8.

⁵ The Puritans, p. 31.

⁶ Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (New York, 1939), p. 213.

ence' since something remarkably like it had been embedded in their own tradition for two hundred years."⁷

Another preconception is the Elizabethan concept of the chain of being. All parts of the universe were seen as ranked, from the highest angels through man down to the lowest clod of dirt. Tillyard says that "this metaphor served to express the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unfaltering order and its ultimate unity. . . . Every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another: there could be no gap."⁸ Man's place in the chain is lower than that of the angels, with whom he shares the highest human faculty, reason. He is higher than the animals, with whom he shares a physical nature.

With this view of world order, a definition of sin can be phrased as a violation of the ordered place in the chain. Man can sin by attempting to achieve the power and prerogatives of a higher level, even aspiring to be like God--the Greek hubris. Or he can fail to use his higher faculties, denying that there is any experience above the sensual. Of the two forms of deviation from the ordained place in the great chain, Hawthorne felt that the first was more dangerous. Warren comments that to Hawthorne "pride was more

⁷ The New England Mind, p. 213.

⁸ E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York, n.d.), pp. 25-26.

seductive than sensuality. . . . He at once deplored pride (in others and in himself) and was fascinated by it."⁹ To Hawthorne, "the worst form of intellectual pride is that of the scientist, who understands men by cold analysis rather than by affectionate intuition."¹⁰ Levin feels that Hawthorne may even have prophesied for our period "when he warns us against such dangers as may impend, with the triumph of cold-blooded experimentation over the sense of moral responsibility."¹¹

This study of Hawthorne's use of laughter can find its frame of reference within such a world-view, with its concept of sin as departure, up or down, from the ordered place of man. Since the world is symbol and every event, every word and gesture, is a possible source of insight into the meaning of truth, laughter may be considered as both a realistically justified response of a character and a signal suggesting a deeper meaning to the reader. As Pearson comments, "Hawthorne's use of symbols is like Wagner's use of leit-motif to recall what has come before, and to bring to the mind a greater consciousness than the ear alone can comprehend. The effect of this device is like that of T. S. Eliot's borrowed lines from the past, which not only have their dir-

⁹ Austin Warren, Nathaniel Hawthorne: Representative Selections (New York, 1934), p. xxv.

¹⁰ Warren, p. xxvii.

¹¹ Levin, p. 65.

ect and proper part in the progress of the poem but bring in allusive parallel the scenes from which originally they came."¹² The repeated laughter of characters builds up an effect that unifies some of Hawthorne's tales. This effect, a meaning-by-association, carries over to the stories where laughter is used only once or twice.

Referring to Hawthorne's use of laughter in relation to his symbolic writing does not mean that laughter is a symbol in itself. It is a sound-image motif both having meaning and validity within the surface reality of the given situation and recalling its meaning in other contexts. Normally the sound of laughter arouses the expectation of finding harmony, peace, happiness, well-being, a feeling of self-satisfaction in the person who laughs. When these are absent, then the laughter at once calls attention to a contrast between expectation and reality. The reader, or the observer, analyzes the laughter to find out how it fails to reflect happiness and uses some word like "ironic," "mocking," or "scornful" to describe the contrast. Hawthorne uses this natural reaction as a signal to the reader to probe beneath the surface of a tale--or of a situation--for the underlying meaning.

Hawthorne's use of laughter will be considered first in relation to possible sources which might have influenced his literary imagination or shaped his technique. Examples of

¹² Norman Holmes Pearson, ed., The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, 1937), p. xiii.

laughter from the tales will be considered, illustrating several ways it is used. Sometimes it characterizes persons who are definitely evil, such as wizards, demons, witches, fiends, etc. Laughter is also used to characterize persons who are participating in evil by seeking forbidden knowledge or power. Some uses of laughter point to the opposite extreme of blindness to moral or spiritual realities. In some tales the sound of laughter comes not from human but from non-human sources. Finally two tales will be examined in detail, to show how Hawthorne used laughter as a motif to give emotional and thematic unity.

It is only fair to admit at the beginning of this study that Hawthorne's technique at its best is subtle--as the best poetry is subtle. The real significance of Hawthorne's laughter can best be seen from the artistic distance indicated by his instruction that Twice-Told Tales "be read in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which it was written; if opened in the sunlight, it is apt to look exceedingly like a volume of blank pages"(I.16).

CHAPTER I
A SURVEY OF POSSIBLE SOURCES

A survey of writings which may have been influential in shaping Hawthorne's artistic technique reveals several relevant sources. It is true, as many critics have observed, that although Hawthorne read widely, he did not use his reading as a direct source, except for historical settings. He wrote of his observations of people and places in his notebooks--but did not comment on his reading. Austin Warren says that "he read for recreation, for escape, for historical backgrounds needed in his own tales, for the chance acquisition of motifs which might stimulate his own imagination--in short, for his own purposes. He was purely a creator to a degree which is rare today."¹ "When he sat down to write, it was--literally and metaphorically--in a bare room populated only by the creatures of his own imagination."² Randall Stewart, specifically looking for the influence of Spenser's Faerie Queen, finds little tangible evidence, though the poem was a favorite of Hawthorne's from childhood. "He is one of the least allusive of modern writers; and in both the conception and the execution of his fiction, he

¹ Austin Warren, "Hawthorne's Reading," NEQ, VIII (1935), p. 480.

² Warren, p. 497.

maintained a sturdy independence. Since he was no learned plagiarist of other writers, the student of Hawthorne must not expect, in any obvious way, to track him in their snow. Shadowy traces of Hawthorne's reading, however, may be found in his works."³

"Shadowy traces" may be detected of Shakespeare's works, of Milton's Paradise Lost, and of the Gothic novels. Hawthorne had read all these, and his adaptation of aspects serves only to underline his own creativity and originality, since he did not borrow or copy, but adapted and transmuted. Therefore a study of his use of this one device or technique --laughter, as a characterizing image or sound motif--gives insight into Hawthorne's use of his sources and his own literary craftsmanship.

Robin, the central character of the story, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," has been identified by Connors as the Robin Goodfellow or Puck of Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream.⁴ Puck is described as "that shrewd and knavish sprite" who would sometimes "mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm" (II.i.33,39). He not only laughs at others' blunders, but causes others to laugh:

I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon and make him smile

³ Randall Stewart, "Hawthorne and The Faerie Queen," Philological Quarterly, XII (1933), 197.

⁴ Thomas E. Connors, "'My Kinsman, Major Molineux': A Reading," Mod. Language Notes, LXXIV (1959), 299-300.

And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh,
 And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
 A merrier hour was never wasted there. (II.i.43,44,55-57)

Hawthorne's Robin--a night-wanderer also--causes great roars of laughter, and eventually joins in the laughter at his kinsman. The physical description also underlines the identification, as he enters the town from the forest with wallet slung from his shoulder and with a cudgel of oak sapling and root. Hawthorne uses the word "shrewd" six times to describe his Robin.

In Paradise Lost, Milton used laughter in several different contexts that may have influenced Hawthorne's later use. In two contexts laughter is associated with the superior knowledge of God, hidden from men. In Book VIII God set his works before men, but did wisely in concealing the workings of the heavens--whether the sun revolves around the earth--from men:

He his Fabric of the Heav'ns
 Hath left to their disputes, perhaps to move
 His laughter at their quaint opinions wide (76-78)

Again in Book XII "great laughter was in Heav'n / . . . to see the hubbub strange / And hear the din" (59-61) among the confused builders of the Tower of Babel who find they cannot understand each other.

In other contexts, laughter is used by Milton in association with domination or superior power. As Satan approaches the gates of Hell, the Snaky Sorceress speaks of God:

who sits above and laughs the while
 At thee ordain'd his drudge, to execute

Whate'er his wrath, which he calls Justice, bids.
(II.731-733)

In Book V the Son speaks to God:

Mightie Father, Thou thy foes
Justly hast in derision, and secure
Laugh'st at thir vain designs and tumults vain
(735-737)

In Book VI Satan and his fallen angels recognize the hopelessness of continuing their assaults against the forces of God and Michael:

What should they do? if on they rusht, repulse
Repeated, and indecent overthrow
Doubt'd, would render them yet more despis'd
And to their foes a laughter. (600-603)

The fall of man is an occasion of laughter to Satan and the fallen angels. In Book X Satan says:

Him by fraud I have seduc'd
From his creator, and the more to increase
Your wonder, with an Apple; he thereat
Offended, worth your laughter, hath giv'n up
Both his beloved Man and all his World,
To Sin and Death a prey. (485-490)

God also sees that this will be a source of laughter:

that with so much ease
I suffer them to enter and possess
A place so heav'nly, and conniving seem
To gratifie my scornful Enemies,
That laugh, as if transported with some fit
Of Passion. (X.622-627)

And men themselves, succumbing to sin:

Shall yeild up all their vertue, all thir fame
Ignobly, to the traines and to the smiles
Of these fair Atheists, and now swim in Joy,
(Erelong to swim at larg) and laugh. (XI.623-626)

Milton therefore used laughter to accompany an awareness of superior or hidden knowledge, a feeling of superior

power or domination, and contemplation of the fall of man or man's natural depravity. These associations may have suggested to Hawthorne the similar ideas that he conveys by the use of unusual laughter.

Melmoth, the Wanderer, a Gothic tale by Charles Robert Maturin, seems to have been the most direct source for Hawthorne's use of laughter. There is no conclusive evidence that he read this romance, which was published in 1820. However, his sister Elizabeth stated that a Circulating Library in Salem "supplied him with most of the novels then published."⁵ There is a record that Mary Manning, his aunt, borrowed another of Maturin's novels, The Wild Irish Boy, from the Salem Athenaeum in October of 1827.⁶ Further evidence is given by his early romance Fanshawe, in which a character is named Melmoth and a quotation from Maturin's poetry is used as the epigraph to chapter eight.

Maturin's title figure is characterized by his unnatural bursts of laughter. At his first appearance he "burst into a laugh so loud, wild, and protracted, that the peasants, starting with as much horror at the sound as at that of the

⁵ Randall Stewart, "Recollections of Hawthorne by his Sister Elizabeth," AL, XVI (Jan. 1945), p. 324.

⁶ Marion L. Kesselring, "Hawthorne's Reading, 1828-1850," Bulletin of New York Public Library, LIII (1949), p. 187. At this period all loans from the Salem Athenaeum were made by Mary Manning on behalf of Hawthorne.

storm, hurried away."⁷ Later he is recognized as the "stranger whose demoniac laugh had so appalled" (p. 29). The book concerns the search of John Melmoth, a descendant, for information about his ancestor, who began his "wanderings" one hundred and fifty years earlier. John's curiosity is awakened by tales of local legend, and by a portrait of Melmoth and a manuscript left him by his uncle. The manuscript tells of the encounter between a man named Stanton and Melmoth. John's first personal contact with Melmoth comes when he is witness to a shipwreck and sees a figure on the cliff, also watching. "Melmoth [the younger] heard a laugh that chilled his blood" (p. 50). He recalls that Stanton had "recognized his supposed demoniac character by the laugh with which he hailed the spectacle of the blasted lovers. The echo of that laugh rung in Melmoth's ears" (p. 50). He climbs up to try to reach the figure of the Wanderer but falls into the sea and is saved by the only survivor of the shipwreck. This person, Alonzo Monçada, later tells of his own contacts with Melmoth and his search for him. This account of Monçada's occupies the remainder of the book, with three other tales interpolated as parts of it. In the concluding two chapters, Melmoth the Wanderer joins Monçada and John and indicates that his hundred and fifty years of wandering are completed.

⁷ Charles Robert Maturin, Melmoth the Wanderer, (Lincoln, 1961), p. 23. Page references in the text will be to this edition.

"Mortals--you are here to talk of my destiny, and of the events which it has involved. That destiny is accomplished, I believe, and with it terminate those events that have stimulated your wild and wretched curiosity. . . . You, Senhor, are armed with your beads--and you, Melmoth, are fortified by that vain and desperate inquisitiveness, which might, at a former period, have made you my victim,"--(and his features underwent a short but horrible convulsion)--"but now makes you only my mockery." (pp. 407-408)

The two are warned not to interfere the following night, no matter what sounds they hear coming from his room. As predicted the sounds are horrifying, and the only clue to Melmoth's fate is the evidence that a body has been dragged up the hill to the cliff above the sea.

Maturin's theme is the danger of curiosity--the urge to explore into hidden knowledge. This, he hints, is what has been responsible for Melmoth's long wanderings. In return for secret knowledge and powers, he has been destined to an existence prolonged by one hundred and fifty years.

"It has been reported of me, that I obtained from the enemy of souls a range of existence beyond the period allotted to mortality--a power to pass over space without disturbance or delay, and visit remote regions with the swiftness of thought--to encounter tempests without the hope of their blasting me, and penetrate into dungeons, whose bolts were as flax and tow at my touch. It has been said that this power was accorded to me, that I might be enabled to tempt wretches in their fearful hour of extremity, with the promise of deliverance and immunity, on condition of their exchanging situations with me. . . . No one has ever exchanged destinies with Melmoth the Wanderer. I have traversed the world in the search, and no one, to gain that world, would lose his own soul! . . . None can participate in my destiny but with his own consent--none have consented. . . . I alone must sustain the penalty. If I have put forth my hand and eaten of the fruit of the interdicted tree, am I not driven from the presence of God and the region of paradise, and sent to wander amid worlds of barrenness and curse for ever and ever?" (pp. 408-409)

The interpolated tales have told of persons in various extremities--condemned sane to a madhouse, tortured by the Inquisition, driven to desperation by starving children--who all still refused to risk their souls' salvation for Melmoth's supernatural aid.

The character of Melmoth is not completely Mephistophelian, however. He achieves something of the tragic stature of a Faust in his relationship with Immalee-Isadora. Encountering her first on an island where she had been lost as a child and had become the object of worship by the natives, he awakens unselfish love in her heart. She is the only "victim" who is not in dire straits when approached by Melmoth. In her innocence and out-going trustfulness she seems to speak for the inherent, uncorrupted religious impulse. As he confronts her, Melmoth's situation is shown in its sharpest focus. As William F. Axton states, Melmoth's "evil consists in his cynical despair of human love and compassion. Ironically, this despair is the product of the very knowledge he had sold his soul to gain."⁸ Despite the perverted and gloomy picture he paints for her of the civilized world, Immalee asks of him only, "Will you be there?" (p. 247) As he seeks out individuals driven to the brink of despair by the injustice and cruelty of humanity, he tempts them to join him in his renunciation of belief in the moral order

⁸ Melmoth, critical introduction by William F. Axton, p. xvii.

of the universe. Immalee's unselfish interest in him--her willingness to join him not for her own deliverance but because of her love for him--comes close to convincing him of the possibility of human goodness.

Though Maturin's use of laughter associated with the Wanderer is the most striking example, he used it in other contexts. The parricide who assists Monçada in escaping from the convent also gives way to laughter--appropriate only in the sense that he possesses guilty knowledge that Monçada does not have.

It is impossible for me [Monçada] to describe the change his [the parricide's] expression underwent while I uttered these words. He looked at me for some time without speaking, with an indefinable mixture of sarcasm, contempt, doubt, and curiosity in his countenance, and then attempted to laugh, but the muscles of his face were too stubborn and harsh to admit of this modulation. To features like his, frowns were a habit, and smiles a convulsion. He could produce nothing but a rictus Sardonius, the terrors of which there is no describing. It is very frightful to behold crime in its merriment,--its smile must be purchased by many groans. My blood ran cold as I looked at him. I waited for his voice as a kind of relief. At length he said, "Do you imagine me such an idiot [sic] as to promote your escape at the risk of imprisonment for life,--perhaps of immurement,--perhaps of the Inquisition?" and again he laughed.

(p. 144)

Because of the crime he had committed, the parricide was assumed to be an initiate into the depths of evil; and because he had found a passage out of the convent, he had power over Monçada, who was willing to risk anything in order to gain his freedom.

Another example of the use of unnatural laughter occurs

in the American Gothic novel, Wieland, by Charles Brockden Brown, which Hawthorne borrowed from the Salem Athenaeum in January of 1838.⁹ In the character of Carwin, Brown treats the theme of the danger of too much curiosity into hidden knowledge. Carwin's curiosity, coupled with his natural aptitude for ventriloquism, leads him to contribute to the moral and physical destruction of Wieland. The "supernatural voices" which he supplies play on Wieland's preoccupation with his father's supposed cremation because of his refusal to carry out the divine command to kill his wife and children. Feeling that he is achieving spiritual power, Wieland murders his wife. Later he describes his sensations: "Such was the elation of my thoughts, that I even broke into laughter. I clapped my hands and exclaimed, 'It is done! My sacred duty is fulfilled! To that I have sacrificed, O my God! thy last and best gift, my wife!'"¹⁰ However, this laughter is not repeated and serves only to intensify the madness and unreality of Wieland's obsession. Carwin himself is not characterized by laughter, nor is he the tragic figure that Melmoth is. His curiosity is just curiosity, not the universal thirst for knowledge.

Hawthorne therefore had some significant examples from his reading of the use of ironic laughter. Milton uses

⁹ Kesselring, p. 175.

¹⁰ Charles Brockden Brown, Wieland, or The Transformation, (New York, 1926), p. 194.

laughter to emphasize the contrast between the "links" in the chain of creation. The superior level is expected to dominate the lower level. God is supposed to have knowledge denied to man--He laughs at man's presumptuous attempts to understand. Satan and the fallen angels, above man but below God, can laugh at the futility of their own assault against heaven and also at their superiority over the frailty of man. In the Gothic novels laughter is used to characterize those who are aspiring to rise above their ordered place. Melmoth, the parricide, and Carwin use their higher faculties, their reasoning power, not to gain knowledge about God but to deny His existence.

CHAPTER II

THE USES OF LAUGHTER

In order to see the full meaning of laughter as Hawthorne uses it in his tales, we shall first look at some examples of ironic laughter, examining its significance in different situations. Laughter is almost always part of Hawthorne's characterization of evil. Supernatural beings--a wizard, a witch, a thinly-disguized devil--laugh as they exult in the powers they exercise over human beings. Evil actions or attitudes of human beings are often indicated by laughter. The use of the higher faculties of reason and intelligence for selfish purposes or in order to gain power over others is in Hawthorne's view an evil and dangerous thing. He therefore uses demonic laughter to characterize those who show this human tendency. Some characters gain understanding of themselves and the world through participation in evil; their initiation into sin brings insight into the reality of existence. Laughter is sometimes a signal of this initiation experience. At the other extreme are persons who are blind to any significance in life above the material or sensual level. Their lack of spiritual awareness makes them intolerant or contemptuous of others who have artistic ideals or spiritual goals. Finally there are examples from tales in which Hawthorne uses laughter as

a sound-effect, coming from non-human instruments--the wind, a train whistle, or other "natural" sources.

The use of laughter to characterize a demonic or evil figure is the most obvious evidence of the influence of the Gothic tradition on Hawthorne. Almost inevitably the mention of fiends, demons, witches, wizards, and other definitely evil beings in Hawthorne's tales will be accompanied by their laughter or at least by evil smiles. In what is usually thought to be his earliest extant tale, "Alice Doane's Appeal," the "wizard laughed aloud" (XII.286) at being told of the murder of Walter Brome by Alice's brother as revenge for her supposed seduction. In the climactic graveyard scene Leonard and his sister Alice, with the aid of the wizard, seek confirmation of Alice's innocence from the spirit of the murdered Brome. The wizard calls forth the souls of the departed and they rise at his bidding. "Yet none but souls accursed were there, and fiends counterfeiting the likeness of departed saints." Their countenances "were contorted now by intolerable pain or hellish passion, and now by an unearthly and derisive merriment" (XII.290). These fiends are later described as sharing "glances of hatred and smiles of bitter scorn" (XII.291) and as reacting with "glee" to the idea of the seduction.

In one of the later tales, "Feathertop," the old witch is "convulsed with laughter" (II.267) at the success of her attempt to create a man from a scarecrow. When he replies,

"With all my heart," the incongruity of this response causes her to laugh "setting her hands to her sides and laughing loudly" (II.263). The satirical scheme of sending Feather-top out to impersonate a man strikes her as funny. "Here the witch thrust her wrinkled face close to the puppet's, chuckling irrepressibly, and fidgeting all through her system, with delight at the idea which she meant to communicate" (II.264). This is as close to humor as Hawthorne ever gets, and the satire on the human tendency to judge by exterior appearance is effective and pointed.

Young Goodman Brown's tempter is another pointedly demonic figure. As they journey into the depths of the forest, Brown's mention of his awe before the goodness of the minister sends his companion into gales of laughter. "Thus far the elder traveller had listened with due gravity; but now burst into a fit of irrepressible mirth, shaking himself so violently that his snake-like staff actually seemed to wriggle in sympathy. 'Ha! Ha! Ha!' shouted he again and again; . . . 'prithee, don't kill me with laughing'" (II.93).

Goody Cloyse, whom they meet, greets the evil companion as one insider to another. "'Ah, your worship knows the recipe,' cried the old lady, cackling aloud" (II.94).

In the allegorical story, "The Celestial Railroad," Mr. Smooth-it-away plays the role of the tempter, luring the modern pilgrim away from the path followed by Bunyan's Christian. He laughs away the doubts at the efficacy of

the modern route. "'Poh, poh, you are obtuse!" said Mr. Smooth-it-away, with a hearty laugh" (II.216). An even more revealing laugh is recorded at the end of the journey: "And then did my excellent friend Mr. Smooth-it-away laugh outright, in the midst of which cachinnation a smoke-wreath issued from his mouth and nostrils, while a twinkle of lurid flame darted out of either eye, proving indubitably that his heart was all of a red blaze" (II.234).

In addition to these more-or-less living devils, there are several pictures or sketches of demons--captured in the act of laughing. In Peter Goldthwaite's obsessive search for the treasure he is certain his ancestor hid in the house, he finds a sketch which points to the outcome of the search--though Peter doesn't understand. This sketch "represented a ragged man, partly supporting himself on a spade, and bending his lean body over a hole in the earth, with one hand extended to grasp something that he had found. But close behind him, with a fiendish laugh on his features, appeared a figure with horns, a tufted tail, and a cloven hoof" (I.442). This sketch seems close kin to the painted figures on the bowl of Feathertop's life-sustaining pipe--"little demons, each duly provided with horns and a tail, and dancing hand in hand, with gestures of diabolical merriment, round the circumference of the pipe bowl" (II.273). The pictured devils, unlike the human ones, have the conventional horns and tail. But both laugh--fiendishly, diabolically, irrepressibly.

A different kind of devil appears in "The Devil in Manuscript"--the personification of the diabolical force which the author feels in his literary creations. Oberon, the author, asks of his friend (the narrator of the tale), "Would you have me a damned author?" (III.580) Acting the answer to his own question, he throws all his manuscripts into the fire.

The tales were almost consumed, but just then threw forth a broad sheet of fire, which flickered as with laughter, making the whole room dance in its brightness, and then roared portentously up the chimney.

"You saw him? . . . how he glared at me and laughed, in that last sheet of flame, with just the features that I imagined for him!" (III.581)

The fiend which the author Oberon sees in his writings has the same characterizing demonic laugh, flaunting its power over him.

This conventional mocking power of the devil is spelled out more fully in "The Seven Vagabonds" when Hawthorne describes one of the visitors to the wayside showman's wagon. The Straggler "pretended to familiarity with the Devil, so I fancied that he was fitted to pursue and take delight in his way of life, by possessing some of the mental and moral characteristics, the lighter and more comic ones, of the Devil in popular stories. Among them might be reckoned a love of deception for its own sake, a shrewd eye and a keen relish for human weakness and ridiculous infirmity, and the talent of petty fraud" (I.405). This catalog of the attributes of the popular or conventional devil shows his ability to deceive through his occult knowledge and his use of his powers to mock human frailty--the bases of the typical

devilish laughter.

The laughter of these fiends or witches is the evidence or outgrowth of their secret knowledge, gained through their alliance with the forces of evil. This knowledge gives them power over mere mortals. They can, like the wizard, command the dead souls to give up their secrets; or like Goodman Brown's tempter, reveal the hidden sins behind pious exteriors; or like the witch, confound blind and superficial people with a man of straw and smoke. This openly devilish laughter is one of the closest links with the Gothic tradition, and is possibly a direct result of the influence of Melmoth.

The openly acknowledged devils who laugh are few, however, in comparison with the definitely mortal and human characters who are portrayed as laughing. Hawthorne was influenced by the Gothic tradition--but his central aim in writing was never a striving for the sensational, the horrifying, the bizarre and terrifying for its own sake. He was absorbed in his exploration of the human heart, the springs of human attitude and action. The presence of fiends and witches in his stories is not enough to justify classifying him as a horror-tale writer. He attempts to portray the evil in the human heart--which can lead a man to give himself up wholly to his evil impulses. He sees the dimensions of the human predicament--the inescapable mixture of the divine spark with the earthly propensity toward sin.

In many of his tales he portrays characters who ally themselves with the forces of evil or who recognize the presence of evil in the world by their own involvement in it. The laughter of these characters links them, if only for a moment, with fiends and devils.

Roderick Elliston, the man who had a snake in his bosom, gained the ability to perceive hidden evil in others because of his own sin. He pointed an accusing finger at another man, and laughed as he outlined the effect of the other's hatred. "'Ha, ha!'" chuckled Roderick, releasing his grasp of the man. 'His bosom serpent has stung him then!'" (II.311) Later he compares his own serpent--his sin of jealousy--with the universal tendency toward sin. "'Oh, there is poisonous stuff in any man's heart sufficient to generate a brood of serpents,' said Elliston with a hollow laugh" (II.319). Here Hawthorne links laughter with the knowledge of evil gained by participation in it.

A striking example of the use of laughter to indicate the initiation into evil occurs in "Young Goodman Brown." The climax of Goodman Brown's experience comes when his disillusionment is complete, when he has seen evil lurking behind everything he had thought good. He cries, "'My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come devil; for to thee is this world given'" (II.99). And immediately following this acknowledgment of despair, he breaks into roars of laughter.

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared Goodman Brown when the wind laughed at him. "Let us hear which will laugh loudest." . . . On he flew among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting forth such laughter as set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him. (II.99-100)

His laughter identifies this as an experience of initiation into evil or into the knowledge of evil for the young man. Hawthorne characteristically leaves the reader to decide for himself whether this was a dream or a real event and whether Goodman Brown has actually committed an evil deed or merely lost faith in the reality of goodness through insight into the evil in others.

In the story "Lady Eleanore's Mantle" the central figure is the proud Lady Eleanore. Her sin of inordinate pride is symbolized by her embroidered mantle, which ironically carries smallpox germs and becomes the means of bringing disease and suffering to many, including herself. Evil laughter is heard three times in the course of the story. Lady Eleanore laughs herself: "Lady Eleanore, with a laugh of scorn, drew the rich folds of the embroidered mantle over her hair, in such a fashion as to give a completely new aspect to her beautiful face" (I.318). The people, who recognize and suffer from the evil brought by Lady Eleanore, set up a chorus of laughter:

The people raved against the Lady Eleanore, and cried out that her pride and scorn had evoked a fiend. . . . At times, their rage and despair took the semblance of grinning mirth; and whenever the red flag of the pestilence was hoisted over another and yet another door,

they clapped their hands and shouted through the streets, in bitter mockery: "Behold a new triumph for the Lady Eleanore !" (I.321-322)

Their laughter expresses their feeling of being caught up in the tangled web of sin in the world through which suffering comes by agents of chance. Though they suffer innocently for her pride, they themselves are equally guilty of scorn and contempt.

The most interesting figure in the story is the idealistic youth Jervase Helwyse, who attempts to "save" Lady Eleanore. He first attempts to awaken her human compassion by willingly becoming a stepping-stone for her. Next he urges her to throw off the mantle of pride and to drink of the cup of wine and to share it with the others--to be drawn by a common sacrament into fellowship with humanity. His idealistic belief in her inherent goodness is shattered when he sees her after small-pox has ravaged her beauty. His insight into evil is accompanied by the sound of roars of laughter. "He shook his finger at the wretched girl, and the chamber echoed, the curtains of the bed were shaken, with his outburst of insane merriment" (I.325).

There is a further contrast between good and evil which is indicated by Hawthorne's use of laughter. When man denies or ignores the spiritual dimensions of his make-up, when he is spiritually blind or ignorant, he is in opposition to the insights of those who are spiritually aware. Hawthorne uses laughter, therefore, to characterize as evil those who are

materialistic or grossly physical, or who are aggressively intolerant or contemptuous of spiritual truth.

This laughter of spiritual blindness is shown on a very obvious level in "The Celestial Railroad." The modern travellers consider the plodding pedestrian pilgrims as absurdly old-fashioned.

It was laughable, while we glanced along, as it were, at the tail of a thunderbolt, to observe two dusty foot travellers in the old pilgrim guise. . . . The preposterous obstinacy of these honest people . . . excited great mirth among our wiser brotherhood. We greeted the two pilgrims with many pleasant gibes and a roar of laughter; whereupon they gazed at us with such woful and absurdly compassionate visages that our merriment grew tenfold more obstreperous. (II.217)

To the materially oriented travellers, the Bunyanesque pilgrims really are absurd and incomprehensible.

Another clear-cut contrast between the two extremes is the basis for the story "The Maypole of Merry Mount." The revelers around the Maypole are the epitome of laughter and gayety. Among the masked figures--stag, bear, goat--symbolizing various aspects of man's physical nature, there are those representing man forever laughing: "Other faces wore the similitude of man or woman, but distorted or extravagant, with red noses pendulous before their mouths, which seemed of awful depth, and stretched from ear to ear in an eternal fit of laughter" (I.72). The opposite extreme is shown in the moral earnestness of the Puritans, who can see nothing but evil in the lightheartedness of Merry Mount. "The Puritans affirmed that, when a psalm was pealing from their place of worship, the echo which the forest sent them back

seemed often like the chorus of a jolly catch, closing with a roar of laughter. Who but the fiend, and his bond slaves, the crew of Merry Mount, had thus disturbed them?" (I.78)

In the harshness of his picture of the Puritans, Hawthorne seems to indicate that his position lies somewhere between the two extremes. Merry Mount is frivolous, but the Puritans represent the "moral gloom" of the world. "As the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gayety, even so was their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest" (I.84). Only in the young bride and bridegroom do the Puritans see any excuse for gayety and laughter. They alone, of all the Maypole dancers, are spared to be instructed in a more serious and worthwhile life. "From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth's doom of care and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount" (I.75).

The destructive effect of spiritual blindness is shown in the story "The Artist of the Beautiful," which expresses the dilemma of the artist who cannot communicate his longing for ideal beauty. Owen Warland, a watchmaker, spends years of his life creating what for him is an object of perfect beauty--a mechanical butterfly that can simulate the flight of a real butterfly. The story is constructed around, not his artistic growth, but the reaction of different characters to him. The attitude of Robert Danforth, a brawny blacksmith, represents the gross and physical in man's nature.

Trying to comprehend what Owen is seeking, Robert calls it perpetual motion. Owen rejects this as being too utilitarian a goal. "'I am not ambitious to be honored with the paternity of a new kind of cotton machine'" (II.511). And Robert responds with laughter. "'That would be droll enough!' cried the blacksmith, breaking out into such an uproar of laughter that Owen himself and the bell glasses on his workboard quivered in unison. 'No, no, Owen! No child of yours will have iron joints and sinews'" (II.511). Robert not only does not understand the artist's search, but subtly mocks him for his lack of virility. Owen is strongly affected by Robert's scorn and unbelief, saying, "His hard brute force darkens and confuses the spiritual element within me" (II.511). And immediately afterward he makes a terrible blunder that ruins his creation. Hawthorne comments, "Thus it is that ideas, which grow up within the imagination and appear so lovely to it and of a value beyond whatever men call valuable, are exposed to be shattered and annihilated by contact with the practical" (II.512).

Another form of spiritual blindness is shown in the reaction of Peter Hovenden to Owen. Hovenden is, like Owen, a watchmaker. But his skill in handling delicate mechanisms is used for practical purposes--he represents the utility not of brawn, but of brain. He passes his judgment on Owen's quest; to him it is evil: "Well, take your own course; but I warn you again that in this small piece of mechanism

lives your evil spirit." Owen replies, "You are my evil spirit . . . you and the hard, coarse world!" (II.515) When Owen's epitome of beauty, the butterfly, is finally perfected, demonstrated, and destroyed, it is Peter Houenden who bursts into "a cold and scornful laugh" (II.535).

The third reaction to Owen is that of Annie Houenden, Peter's daughter. At first she seems to understand what he is trying to do, though her laughter is a clue to the reader that her understanding is only superficial. She comes to him with a practical task--mending her thimble. "'But I don't know whether you will condescend to such a task,' said she, laughing, 'now that you are so taken up with the notion of putting spirit into machinery'" (II.517). Owen is heartened by the prospect of understanding and sympathy, and offers to share the secret of his efforts with her.

"You, I know, would hear it with a reverence that I would not expect from the harsh, material world."
 "Would I not? to be sure I would!" replied Annie Houenden, lightly laughing. "Come, explain to me quickly what is the meaning of this little whirligig. . . . See! I will put it in motion." (II.518)

Annie's laughing answer reveals the shallowness of her comprehension, and her playful touch again shatters Owen's careful work. Thus the three who laugh show different forms of spiritual blindness, each of which is detrimental to one who is searching for the expression of the artist's ideal of the beautiful.

In another story, "Rappaccini's Daughter," the use of laughter points to an interesting interpretation of the

tale. It is Professor Baglioni who laughs and his laughter is directed toward Rappaccini and his daughter. When the young man, Giovanni, after inquiring about Rappaccini, then mentions Beatrice, Baglioni answers "with a laugh" (II.118). Later Baglioni muses on a way to protect Giovanni from what he terms the evil schemes of Rappaccini. "'We will thwart Rappaccini yet,' thought he, chuckling to himself" (II.138). The usual interpretation of the story makes Rappaccini the villain-scientist, who has used his daughter as medium for his experiments on the effects of poisons. He has nurtured her on poisons until she is immune to their effects but is fatally poisonous to anything--flora or fauna--that comes in contact with her. However, following the clue of Baglioni's laughter, the reader discovers that the idea of Rappaccini's evil character comes almost entirely through the words and actions of Baglioni, an admitted rival scientist--a jealous one. It is he who says of Rappaccini: "He cares infinitely more for science than for mankind. . . . He would sacrifice human life . . . for the sake of adding so much as a grain of mustard seed to the great heap of his accumulated knowledge" (II.116). Hawthorne comments that "the youth might have taken Baglioni's opinions with many grains of allowance had he known that there was a professional warfare of long continuance between him and Dr. Rappaccini, in which the latter was generally thought to have gained the advantage" (II.117). Beatrice, the daughter, is estranged from human-

ity, not because her nature is poisonous, but because it is truly spiritual. Giovanni is attracted to her and begins to love her and to grow like her--that is, to grow in spiritual understanding. He wavers between the two conceptions of her nature. Is she "angel or demon" (II.126)? He wonders whether his awareness of something strange and evil in her is the "fantasy of a young man's brain" (II.127). He dreams of the possibility of "snatching from her full gaze the mystery which he deemed the riddle of his own existence" (II.127). When he asks her what to believe concerning her, she replies, "Forget what you may have fancied in regard to me. If true to the outward senses, still it may be false in the essence; but the words of Beatrice Rappaccini's lips are true from the depths of the heart outward" (II.130). The final tragedy comes because Giovanni cannot believe in her goodness nor surrender to the love which is opening his eyes to spiritual truth. He gives her the potion prepared by the chuckling, spiritually blind Baglioni, and she dies. Baglioni's laughter has indicated that appearances and truth are in conflict, that what he sees in Rappaccini and his daughter, though "true to the outward senses," is "false in the essence."

The theme of the dedicated striver for perfection is used by Hawthorne in another story, "The Birthmark." The scientist Aylmer seeks, not a mechanical expression of ideal beauty, but a human one. He attempts to use his scientific

knowledge to remove the birthmark from his wife's cheek--that is, to raise her from human imperfection to complete or ideal perfection. He is assisted in his laboratory by Aminadab--who represents the grossly practical side of man. "With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that incrusts him, he seemed to represent man's physical nature; while Aylmer's slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element" (II.55). Aminadab's blindness to the spiritual perfection sought by his master is shown by his opinion of the birthmark. "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark" (II.55). When Aylmer's experiment succeeds and the birthmark fades away, both Aminadab and Aylmer laugh:

He heard a gross, hoarse chuckle which he had long known as his servant Aminadab's expression of delight. "Ah, clod! ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy, "you have served me well! Matter and spirit--earth and heaven--have both done their part in this! Laugh, thing of the senses! You have earned the right to laugh." (II.68)

Aylmer's laughter links him with Leonard Doane's wizard and with Melmoth the Wanderer. He aspires to the power of God, the power to alter creation. At this moment he is experiencing success; the birthmark is almost gone. However, the final result of the experiment is apparent a few minutes later, and the "perfect" Georgianna dies, because the birthmark "was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame. . . . Then a hoarse, chuckling

laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands the completeness of a higher state" (II.69). The story ends with both kinds of laughter, that of man who reaches for the forbidden powers and that of man who denies the possibility of aspiration above sensuality.

There is one further kind of laughter which plays a part in Hawthorne's tales--laughter as sound effect, coming from nature itself and not from a human voice. Like the human laughter, the laughter-sound is not usually a happy sound, but a reflection and reinforcement of the portrayal of evil. In "The Celestial Railroad" the engine is the instrument for transporting the narrator and others presumably toward the Celestial City, though really toward Hell. This underlying truth is shown in the analysis of the sound of the train whistle. "The engine now announced the close vicinity of the final station-house by one last and horrible scream, in which there seemed to be distinguishable every kind of wailing and woe, and bitter fierceness of wrath, all mixed up with the wild laughter of a devil or madman" (II.232). This laughter-sound points to the hidden truth about the trip.

A natural sound is sometimes used by Hawthorne to furnish an ambiguous dual interpretation--as if to avoid insistence of belief in the reality of his tale. In "Alice Doane's Appeal" just after the wizard has laughed aloud at

the account of the murder of Walter Brome this device is used. "Leonard started, but just then a gust of wind came down the chimney, forming itself into a close resemblance of the slow, unvaried laughter by which he had been interrupted. 'I was deceived,' thought he, and thus pursued his fearful story" (XII.286). The evil part the wizard has played in the tragic triangle has been suggested by his laugh. Now this evil is linked to nature itself. The difficulty of assignment of guilt is indicated and the reality of evil itself comes into question.

In another passage already quoted from "The Maypole of Merry Mount," the Puritans hear their psalms echoed back from the forest as laughter. "The echo which the forest sent them back seemed often like the chorus of a jolly catch, closing with a roar of laughter" (I.78). They assign this to the worshipers of gayety at Merry Mount--"The fiend, and his bond slaves, the crew of Merry Mount." But Hawthorne's language leaves room for uncertainty about the source of this laughter-sound. Perhaps the forest itself, primitive and untamed nature, is sending a challenge to the moral order being established by the Puritans.

The story "The Hollow of the Three Hills" is interesting because of the use of sounds to convey the supernatural message of the old woman. Though never actually named a witch, she is suggestively described as "of ill-favored aspect," "withered," a "crone," with a smile that "glimmered on her

countenance, like lamplight on the wall of a sepulchre" (I.228-229). Through her prayer "not meant to be acceptable in heaven" (I.231), she conjures up sounds that reveal to the questing lady the three victims of her sin--her dishonored parents, her betrayed husband, and her deserted child. All is conveyed through sounds; nothing is seen. Among the sounds is wild laughter. "Shrieks pierced through the obscurity of sound, and were succeeded by the singing of sweet female voices, which, in their turn, gave way to a wild roar of laughter, broken suddenly by groanings and sobs, forming altogether a ghastly confusion of terror and mourning and mirth" (I.231). Against the background of this spectrum of sound is heard the "solemn voice of a man" who "sought an auditor for the story of his individual wrong, and interpreted their laughter and tears as his reward of scorn or pity" (I.232). The mysterious quality of the whole event is underscored by Hawthorne's close linking of the sounds to the normal sound-spectrum of the wind. "Even as he went on, the shout, the laugh, the shriek, the sob, rose up in unison, till they changed into the hollow, fitful, and uneven sound of the wind" (I.232). Laughter is used here to indicate the evil aspects of the experience--the old crone's use of demonic powers, and the conviction of evil in the lady.

In the story of Goodman Brown's initiation into the knowledge of evil, sounds play a large part. The laughter of his devil-tempter has already been cited. Goodman

Brown's awareness of the minister and Deacon Gookin is by sound only. "These mingled sounds appeared to pass along the road, within a few yards of the young man's hiding-place; but . . . neither the travellers nor their steeds were visible" (II.98). Further sounds suggest the kind of revelation produced by the old crone in "The Hollow of the Three Hills," as Goodman Brown hears "a confused and doubtful sound of voices" among which he recognizes that of his young wife, Faith. He calls out to her in terror. In answer "there was a scream drowned immediately in a louder murmur of voices, fading into far-off laughter, as the dark cloud swept away, leaving the clear and silent sky above" (II.99). His laughter of despair and participation in evil, already cited, "set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him" (II.100).

In an article discussing "Hawthorne and the Pathetic Fallacy," Edward H. Davidson has considered Hawthorne's references to natural phenomena, citing among others examples from "The Hollow of the Three Hills," and "Young Goodman Brown."¹ He describes Hawthorne's references, not as examples of the "pathetic fallacy," but as growing out of an earlier view of nature and man as existing in a larger harmony in the mind of God. Eighteenth century realism and

¹ Edward H. Davidson, "Hawthorne and the Pathetic Fallacy," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LIV (1955), 486-497.

skepticism caused this view of nature and man to die out, but in some of his writings Hawthorne demonstrated his consciousness of it. "His tendency . . . was to frame the natural order as having anticipated and as having long ago enacted the drama of man; the human mood and emotion become, as it were, a duplication of what nature has itself long known."² It is not that nature is in correspondence with the immediate emotional mood of man, but that nature has experienced or enacted an infinite number of times all the deeper problems of evil and death. The pathetic fallacy is "turned upside down"³ and man is the incidental and transient reflection of nature's awareness. This use of nature as "symbolic spectrum" is attributed by Davidson partly to the Puritan world-view in which "every act of nature becomes a moral lesson for man."⁴ Nature was only an instrument for the use of God, "an outward and visible sign which testified to the invisible reality beyond."⁵

While this is one interesting explanation of Hawthorne's use or interpretation of natural sounds, it is possible at the same time to see them as intensifiers of the emotional moods of the various characters. Hawthorne knew, just as we

² Davidson, p. 488.

³ Davidson, p. 489.

⁴ Davidson, p. 490.

⁵ Davidson, p. 494.

know, that the wind doesn't really laugh demonically just because Goodman Brown's faith is crumbling or because an old woman appeals to demonic powers. But a person who is intensely conscious of the power of evil, who surrenders to it or admits his participation in it, may hear laughter and other human articulations in non-human sounds. Hawthorne very skillfully used this subjective sense to transmit to the reader the intense emotional impact of an experience on a character. His language usually offers the reader two ways of interpreting such phenomena, thus adding to the complexity of meaning. As Goodman Brown and his wife are about to receive the devil's baptism into sin he cries out, "Faith! look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one" and immediately he "found himself amid calm night and solitude, listening to the roar of the wind which died heavily away through the forest" (II.105). The interpretation of his experience is left to the reader as Hawthorne closes with the question, "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" (II.105) It is only the objective reality which is challenged, however, since the effects of Goodman Brown's encounter with evil are cited as lasting for the remainder of his life.

This final example of Hawthorne's use of laughter may serve to focus the various meanings explicit or implied in other tales. Demons must laugh diabolically, since they are by definition evil beings. The reader accepts their evil

nature, though he recognizes them as imaginary or literary creations. Hawthorne was not attempting to convince his reader of the reality of devils but of the reality of evil. The laughter of characters who are participating in evil or who are blind to spiritual truth is a cue to the reader of the reality of their sin. But in what are generally considered Hawthorne's better stories, this classification is neither obvious nor simple. The modern perceptive reader finds the one-to-one allegorical meaning of "The Celestial Railroad" too obvious and ever-simplified. People and actions cannot be as neatly classified into good and evil as the Puritans thought. Hawthorne's more subtle and complex stories record his attempt to show this truth. He does not question the reality of good and evil, but man's power to apprehend. He does not doubt that God works in nature and man, but that man can always see and interpret. Owen Warland's spiritual aspiration seems like madness to others; Giovanni's love for Beatrice appears suicidal; Goodman Brown's knowledge of evil leads only to despair. The reality of good and evil are dependent upon man's ability to discriminate between right and wrong in actual situations and relationships. Hawthorne had the discernment to realize the complexity of this problem.

The foregoing analysis of the different ways that Hawthorne uses laughter, other than the very rare occurrences of simply "happy" laughter, is at best only a tool to make the reader more aware of the complexity of meaning in the

tales. Hawthorne does use an analytical approach in the construction and organization of his fiction and especially of his sketches. He itemizes and catalogues and even parades the possible aspects of an idea, as in "Earth's Holocaust," or "The Procession of Life." But to take one technical facet of the stories, to analyze and pick it apart, is to risk losing the whole in the examination of the parts. Hawthorne's use of language and images often approaches the poetic, and poetry can never be really and completely understood through scientific analysis. Q. D. Leavis, discussing "Hawthorne as Poet," says that his best work, including "Young Goodman Brown," "The Maypole of Merry Mount," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "The Artist of the Beautiful," The Scarlet Letter, and The Blithedale Romance, "is essentially dramatic, its use of language is poetic, and it is symbolic, and richly so, as is the dramatic poet's."⁶ She quotes Hawthorne's tribute to Shakespeare from Our Old Home as equally applicable to his own writings. "Shakespeare has surface below surface, to an immeasurable depth. . . . There is no exhausting the various interpretations." Hawthorne's literary craftsmanship may be illustrated by the examination of his use of laughter as a sound motif in two stories, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and "Ethan Brand." Both are full

⁶ Q. D. Leavis, "Hawthorne as Poet" (Part I), Interpretations of American Literature, ed. Charles Feidelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. (New York, 1959), pp. 31-32.

of laughter, and both are close to poetry in their recurring images and patterned structure.

In the story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the occurrences of laughter point to the structure of the story. The central character, Robin, enters the town at nightfall and begins his search for his kinsman. Each inquiry brings forth laughter, along with threats of various kinds. Robin's quest for knowledge is shown as he attempts to find explanations of these responses. In the final scene all the previous sounds of laughter are heard together, as Robin learns the true relation between the townspeople and his kinsman. Robin's own laughter signals his participation in the mockery of the scene.

Robin's first significant meeting in his quest is with a well-dressed citizen. Robin approaches him humbly, laying hold of the old man's coat and "making a low bow." The gentleman's angry denial of knowledge of Major Molineux is coupled with an assertion of his authority and a threat to throw Robin in the stocks. As Robin leaves he is pursued "by an ill-mannered roar of laughter" from the nearby barber's shop. (III.619) In this and in the second encounter, Robin's assessment of the events could hardly be further from the truth. In this case, "being a shrewd youth," he reasons that the old man is from the country, does not know Major Molineux, and lacks the "breeding to answer a stranger civilly." He says to himself that "even the barber's boys

laugh at you for choosing such a guide! You will be wiser in time, friend Robin."

The second inquiry takes place in the public room of an inn. Robin approaches the innkeeper with more confidence, admitting his lack of funds, but trusting in the high position of his kinsman to gain him instant respect. Instead he receives a threat again--a false accusation that he is a runaway bond servant. As he leaves, a general laugh follows him "in which the innkeeper's voice might be distinguished, like the dropping of small stones into a kettle" (III.623). Robin, "with his usual shrewdness," reasons that "the confession of an empty pocket" outweighed "the name of my kinsman." Again his innocent question has provoked a true response--the laughter that betrays the evil intentions of the people toward his kinsman--but he cannot understand it yet.

Robin's third inquiry is of a "sweet pretty mistress" who wears a red petticoat. The threat in her answer to his question is of a different sort. She claims to know Major Molineux, yet Robin "read in her eyes what he did not hear in her words" and struggles to resist this temptation to abandon his quest. The arrival of the night watchman ends his indecision and he turns to him with his usual question. The only answer he receives is "the sound of drowsy laughter stealing along the solitary street" mingling as counterpoint to the "pleasant titter" which "saluted him from the open window over his head" (III.627). His perception of the

situation is better than of the first two, and being "a good youth, as well as a shrewd one," he leaves rapidly.

His final inquiry is made on the corner beneath the shade of a church steeple. This time he approaches "resolutely" a shadowy figure which proves to be that of a man Robin has noted earlier in the inn--with forehead of "double prominence," "broad hooked nose," "shaggy eyebrows," and "fiery eyes." The man's complexion has undergone a change; one side blazes red, the other is "black as midnight." His mouth "seemed to extend from ear to ear"--frozen laughter. (III.629) This strange person tells Robin to wait there for an hour, when Major Molineux will pass by. He waits, meditating on the strangeness and uncertainty of his surroundings--the moonlight shining through the church windows upon the Bible, his feeling of great loneliness in the midst of a town full of people, a dream or fantasy in which his own home is closed to him--and cries, "Am I here, or there?"

He is joined by a passer-by, a "gentleman in his prime, of open, intelligent, cheerful, and altogether prepossessing countenance," who speaks in "a tone of real kindness" (III.633). Robin tells him of his reason for seeking Major Molineux, whose name "is not altogether strange" to the kind gentleman. The major, a cousin of Robin's clergyman father, had indicated a willingness to assist him in establishing himself in life, and he feels that now he is ready to "profit by his kinsman's generous intentions," having "the name of being a

shrewd youth." As Robin tells of the instructions of the masquerader, they hear noises of rioting in the distance, including "a wild and confused laughter" (III.636). The gentleman comments, "May not a man have several voices, Robin, as well as two complexions?"

The shouts, laughter, and music ("tuneless bray") draw slowly nearer, until Robin perceives a mob of the townspeople, led by the "double-faced fellow," escorting the "tar-and-feathery" Major Molineux out of town. He recognizes his kinsman at once, a "large and majestic person" with "square features, betokening a steady soul" which, however, "his enemies had found means to shake" (III.638-639). "But perhaps the bitterest pang of all was when his eyes met those of Robin, for he evidently knew him on the instant, as the youth stood witnessing the foul disgrace of a head grown gray in honor." Pity, terror, and "bewildering excitement," added to his own adventures of the night, the noises, above all "a perception of the tremendous ridicule in the whole scene" seize and inebriate Robin. He is caught up in the great swell of laughter--the "sluggish merriment" of the drowsy watchman, the "peal of laughter like the ringing of silvery bells" from the "lady of the scarlet petticoat," the "sharp, dry cackinnation" of the "courteous little innkeeper," and the "great broad laugh, broken in the midst by two sepulchral hems" of the old citizen, added to the voices of the barbers and the guests at the inn. Robin sends forth "a shout of

laughter that echoed through the street"--"the loudest there" (III.640). Then the procession moves on "in frenzied merriment," leaving Robin in the silence behind to assess the results of his night's search for knowledge.

The laughter seems to be a signal--a sound image motif--indicating that evil is present and very close to the surface. Neither the reader nor Robin, for all the ironic insistence on his shrewdness, can understand the nature of the evil bubbling up in the hearts of the townspeople until the final witnessing of the humiliation of Major Molineux. The men at the barber's shop, the guests at the inn, the watchman and the petticoat lady share a secret of evil intentions. While Robin's intentions in his quest for his kinsman are not evil, neither are they pure and unselfish. He wants to find Major Molineux in order to "begin in the world," to benefit by his kinsman's "generous intentions," to be respected by the townspeople because of his high connection. The shallowness and immaturity of his self-centered goal is shown to him and to the reader when he joins the jeering crowd in uncontrollable laughter. Though he participates, he recognizes the "steady soul" of his kinsman. He has experienced a brief moment of real human contact with the man who had been up until then simply a means to his own advancement. From this dual experience of identification with suffering good and participation in active evil, he emerges chastened, "his eye not quite as lively," ready for "a new subject of inquiry," "weary of a town

life" (III.641).

As Thomas E. Connors has noted, all of the characters in the story have two complexions.⁷ Robin himself is presented as the virtuous, stalwart, resolute son of a devout rural clergyman, and at the same time as a mischievous, shrewd, cunning Puck, emerging from the forest, which Hawthorne usually identifies with the primitive, savage, and untamed in man's nature. The man with the painted face seems the very devil himself, and yet his doubleness is open and obvious, and he it is who speaks truth to Robin about his kinsman. The kind gentleman seems truly friendly and solicitous, yet his question, "May not a man have several voices . . . as well as two complexions?" opens the possibility that he is the obverse of the devil figure, that evil may be present in apparent good, just as good may be present in apparent evil. At the conclusion of the story, it is he who presents the choice to Robin--help for his further journey of inquiry, or welcome into the midst of the town where, as he is "a shrewd youth," he may "rise in the world without the help" of Major Molineux.

The story "Ethan Brand" opens with a roar of laughter to introduce the title character. As Bartram, the lime-burner, and his little son "sat watching his kiln at nightfall . . . they heard a roar of laughter, not mirthful, but slow, and

⁷ Thomas E. Connors, "'My Kinsman, Major Molineux': A Reading," Modern Language Notes, LXXIV (1959), 299-302.

even solemn, like a wind shaking the boughs of the forest" (III.477). Three more times that roar of laughter is heard, in the course of Hawthorne's revelation of Ethan Brand's situation and relation to the other characters in the tale. He laughs when he tells Bartram the result of his search for the Unpardonable Sin--that he has found it in his own heart. "And then, without mirth in his countenance, but as if moved by an involuntary recognition of the infinite absurdity of seeking through the world for what was the closest of all things to himself, and looking into every heart, save his own, for what was hidden in no other breast, he broke into a laugh of scorn. It was the same slow, heavy laugh, that had almost appalled the lime-burner when it heralded the wayfarer's approach" (III.482). Hawthorne uses significant descriptive words-- "recognition," "absurdity," "scorn"--to add to the effect of horror created by the laughter. Ethan Brand's next outburst occurs after the villagers have arrived, after the German Jew has communicated his identity to Ethan, and after the dog has put on its exhibition in tail-chasing. "Moved, it might be, by a perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of the self-pursuing cur, he broke into the awful laugh, which, more than any other token, expressed the condition of his inward being" (III.492). The last sounding of the "awful laugh" occurs during the night, presumably just before the final action when Ethan Brand casts himself into the lime-kiln. "That night the

sound of a fearful peal of laughter rolled heavily through the sleep of the lime-burner and his little son; dim shapes of horror and anguish haunted their dreams" (III.496).

Thus the four peals of laughter delineate the stages in this final act of Ethan Brand's journey. The first signals his arrival back at the scene of the beginning of his search--the full circle completed. The second accompanies his revelation of his search and its result to Bartram, who carries out the task he was performing when his obsessive search began. "The kiln . . . stood unimpaired, and was in nothing changed since he had thrown his dark thoughts into the intense glow of its furnace, and melted them, as it were, into the one thought that took possession of his life" (III.478). The third concludes his examination of his knowledge of himself in relation to external persons and events--his search recapitulated. The last concludes his self-analysis with his last act of despair.

The contrast between the two lime-burners is somewhat like the contrast between Owen Warland the artist and Peter Hovenden the "mechanic." Roy R. Male has pointed to the contrast shown when Bartram refers to lime-burning as "my business" and Brand replies that he followed "the same craft" (III.481).⁸ To Bartram the fire in the furnace is utilitarian--he tends it in order to make lime. He "watched the fire

⁸ Roy R. Male, Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (Austin, 1957), p. 85.

. . . and troubled himself with no thoughts save the very few that were requisite to his business" (III.479). To Ethan Brand, it was "an intensely thoughtful occupation"; he "had mused to such strange purpose . . . while the fire in this very kiln was burning" (III.479). Because the two men are placed in such contrast it is not surprising to find that Brand's laughter brings an echo from Bartram. When Brana appears at the kiln he asks:

"Did you never hear of Ethan Brand?"

"The man that went in search of the Unpardonable Sin?" asked Bartram, with a laugh. (III.481)

To the man of practicality such a quest would be incomprehensible. Bartram's laugh shows his blindness to the possibility of such an intense spiritual quest. He laughs again, at his own fears, when Brand opens the door of the furnace, almost believing in the reality of the devil Brand is reputed to converse with in the flames. "'Hold! hold!' cried he, with a tremulous attempt to laugh; for he was ashamed of his fears, although they overmastered him. 'Don't, for mercy's sake, bring out your Devil now!'" (III.484) The possibility of evil as a reality had best not be faced, he feels--it is shameful even to admit the idea.

The next section of the story brings the villagers from the tavern to view this incredible man. They arrive "laughing boisterously" (III.485). Three of the men are described at some length, showing them to be confirmed seekers after life's lighter pleasures. The stage agent "had great fame

as a dry joker" (III.486). Lawyer Giles "had been an attorney . . . but flip, sling, and toddy, and cocktails, imbibed at all hours, morning, noon, and night, had caused him to slide from intellectual to various kinds and degrees of bodily labor" (III.486). The village doctor was "purple-visaged, rude, and brutal. . . . Brandy possessed this man like an evil spirit, and made him as surly and savage as a wild beast, and as miserable as a lost soul" (III.487). Seeing the squandered talents of these men who have lived without purpose, Ethan Brand is reminded of the first step in his search for the Unpardonable Sin. "Ye brute beasts . . . years and years ago I probed into your hearts and found nothing there for my purpose" (III.488). The next step is presented as Ethan confronts Humphrey, the father of the girl Esther whom he "had made the subject of a psychological experiment, and wasted, absorbed, and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process" (III.489). Remembering his guilt he repeats his conviction that the Unpardonable Sin is in his own heart. The encounter with the German Jew indicates the alliance with the forces of evil--his Faustian compact with the devil--that purchased for him hidden knowledge and powers at the expense of his soul. The Jewish showman's crude exhibition of pictures produces among the villagers "much merriment at its abominable deficiency of merit" (III.490). But Ethan Brand, peering into the picture box, says, "I remember you now. . . . Get thee into the furnace yonder!"

(III.491). The recapitulation of Brand's search is completed by the incident of the dog chasing its own tail. "Never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained; never was heard such a tremendous outbreak of growling, snarling, barking, and snapping, --as if one end of the ridiculous brute's body were at deadly and most unforgivable enmity with the other" (III.492). This, too, "was greeted with universal laughter, clapping of hands, and shouts of encore" by the spectators--laughter of spiritual blindness. This is followed by Ethan's third "awful laugh," brought forth by his "perception of some remote analogy between his own case and that of the self-pursuing cur."

In the final section Ethan Brand muses in solitude before the furnace--exploring and confirming this "remote analogy." Cyril A. Reilly has pointed out the significance of the tail-chasing dog incident which "manifestly parallels and makes concrete the theme of 'the infinite absurdity of [Brand's] seeking through the world for what was the closest of all things to himself.'"⁹ His sin lay in his "pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained." He had erred in losing the balance between head and heart--between intellect and human sympathy. He had engaged in "that vast intellectual development, which, in its progress, disturbed the counterpoise between his mind and heart" (III.494).

⁹ Cyril A. Reilly, "On the Dog's Chasing his own Tail in 'Ethan Brand,'" *PMLA*, LXVIII (1953), 980.

"He had lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity" (III.495). His final outburst of laughter echoes through the night as he casts himself onto the marble to be burned into what Bartram calls "special good lime" (III.498).

This destruction of Ethan Brand parallels in many ways that of Melmoth the Wanderer, as N. F. Doubleday has noted. "'Ethan Brand' resembles the last two chapters of the romance [*Melmoth*] and Hawthorne's subtitle, 'A Chapter from an Abortive Romance,' points up that resemblance; for if 'Ethan Brand' be considered a chapter from a romance, it must surely be the last."¹⁰ Melmoth, too, had gained knowledge and power through a compact with the devil. In the last two chapters, after revealing some of his story, he awaits his death alone. Terrible sounds are heard during the night, and the evidence in the morning indicates that he was cast over the cliff into the sea, which in his prophetic dream had seemed a sea of fire.

The most distinctive characterizing device used by Hawthorne in describing Ethan Brand is his "awful laugh." It is used structurally to indicate the organization of the story, gaining force through the repetition. It is also used in contrast with laughter from the other characters, to emphasize the contrast in their understanding of what Hawthorne sees as truth about the human condition. The one

¹⁰ Neal Frank Doubleday, "Hawthorne's Use of Three Gothic Patterns," *College English*, VII (February 1946), 258.

element of hope injected into an otherwise gloomy story is given in the character of the lime-burner's son Joe, described as "more sensitive than the obtuse, middle-aged clown" his father. (III.477) The contrast in their perception is shown as Bartram explains Brand's introductory "roar of laughter" as "some merry fellow from the bar-room in the village, who dared not laugh loud enough within doors lest he should blow the roof of the house off." Joe replies, "But father, he does not laugh like a man that is glad" (III.477). Later as he goes to bed at the end of the evening, leaving Ethan Brand alone by the kiln, "the tears came into his eyes, for his tender spirit had an intuition of the bleak and terrible loneliness in which the man had enveloped himself" (III.493-494). Little Joe felt the human sympathy that Ethan Brand lacked; in Joe the hidden knowledge, the intuitive insight into the heart of another, was balanced by the compassion of a warm heart.

CONCLUSION

From this study of Hawthorne's use of laughter as a sound-image motif or characterizing device, several conclusions may be drawn. The first is the awareness of Hawthorne's conscious artistry in the use of laughter. The laughter of fiends and devils modulates into the laughter of those who are less obviously evil. The repeated use of laughter to characterize evil-doers links together the proud, self-centered manipulators and the blind, intolerant obstructors. Laughter as a sound-image motif effectively unifies two stories in almost poetic manner.

In this, as in his development of themes and character-types, Hawthorne tended to retain the same techniques throughout his literary works. The evil laughter of the wizard and the devil-tempter is heard again from Westervelt. Mistress Hibbens is a cackling cousin of the witch and the old crone. Both Chillingworth and Judge Pyncheon are characterized by meaningful smiles. Dimmesdale, like Goodman Brown, feels the impulse to laugh when he realizes the evil of hypocrisy. Pearl, the living symbol of sin, laughs freely and repeatedly. One important scene in The Blithedale Romance shows the masked carnival of the inhabitants of the community, reminiscent of Merry Mount, which sends Coverdale into roars of laughter. All are a continuation and refinement of the use

of laughter developed in the tales.

Another conclusion concerns the reality of evil as presented by Hawthorne. The characters whose evil nature is most readily identifiable are those who are least "real"--that is, the witches, fiends, wizards, who are evil by definition. Their demonic or mocking laughter characterizes them in somewhat the same way that Spenser's material symbols characterize his masque figures. But the laughter of the more naturalistic characters is usually subject to more than one interpretation. Hawthorne seems to be saying that good and evil are present in the world, but that it is not always easy to identify them. Devils who are literary creations may be unmistakable; but in real life evil men do not have horns, tails, and cloven hooves. Laughter is a real sound and may be reduced scientifically to its acoustical components, as can a blast from a train whistle. The significance of the sound, however, depends on the ability of the auditor to hear and interpret. A writer has to choose how much of this interpretation he will suggest to the reader through the selection of details he includes and the connotations of the words he conveys them with. Hawthorne was following through the implications of the Puritan world view of the symbolic significance of sense experience. If God communicates symbolically through nature and human events, then it is very important to be able to "read" the message. And Hawthorne indicates that it is not always easy to distinguish.

between good and evil in persons or in situations. "Obvious" evil may be a mask for eventual good, and apparent good may lead to destruction.

This ambiguity of evil is shown most clearly in the stories which show an experience of initiation into sin or knowledge of evil. Robin's experience was instructive; his story closes with the possibility that he will be a "wiser" Robin, presumably better able to discern good and evil. Ethan Brand's quest for knowledge, however, leads to conviction of guilt and despair. The lady in "The Hollow of the Three Hills" gains true knowledge by appeal to evil powers. Goodman Brown's knowledge of evil through similarly evil powers, however, blinds him forever to the truth of goodness.

Hawthorne seems to present as his conclusion that knowledge may as easily damn as save. This is perhaps one explanation for his frequent portrayal of scientists as evil. They pursued knowledge for its own sake, regardless of consequences. But more interesting is the connection with his own pursuit of knowledge. He himself is following the course of Owen Warland in seeking as an artist to construct a literary masterpiece. He portrays the artist as isolated from others by their lack of comprehension. His own interest in the manifestations of evil may be related to his doubts about the rightness of the career in writing that he was engaged

in. He may have felt that there was a devil in his manuscripts, gloatingly seeking his damnation. Like Ethan Brand, he at *times* seems to have felt that he "had lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity." He felt that isolation from society was dangerous--and yet an artist must withdraw from the world in order to create.

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